

Ghost 186

Chapter 186: bloodline silent threat

The Chen family residence stood behind three layers of guarded gates, its courtyards neat, symmetrical, and intimidating in their quiet order. Old cypress trees lined the stone paths, their shadows long even in the afternoon light, as if the house itself was listening.

Lady Chen arrived without ceremony.

Her carriage entered through the side gate, as instructed. No banners. No servants announcing her presence. To the outside world, this was merely a daughter returning home to visit her aging father.

But within these walls, nothing was ever simple.

She stepped down gracefully, her silk shoes barely making a sound against the stone. The servants bowed low, their eyes carefully lowered. No one asked questions. No one spoke unless spoken to.

She walked straight toward the inner study.

Her father, Chen Guowei, had not summoned her—but she knew better than to wait.

The Study of Secrets

Chen Guowei's study smelled of old paper, ink, and bitter tea.

The windows were open, yet the air felt heavy.

He stood with his back to the door, hands clasped behind him, staring at a scroll laid open on his desk. The lines of his face were deeper than before, his shoulders more rigid, as though something had tightened inside him and refused to loosen.

Lady Chen stopped three steps behind him.

"Father."

He did not turn immediately.

Only after a long pause did he speak.

"You came sooner than I expected."

"I came as soon as I could," she replied calmly. "You sent no letter, but your silence was loud."

He finally turned.

His eyes—sharp, calculating, and burdened with decades of ambition—searched her face.

"You have changed," he said slowly.

She met his gaze without flinching. "So have you."

A faint, humorless smile touched his lips.

"Yes," he admitted. "I suppose I have."

He gestured toward a chair. "Sit."

She did.

Only then did he pick up the folded paper from his desk and slide it across the table toward her.

Lady Chen did not reach for it immediately.

She already knew.

But she allowed the silence to stretch, watching him carefully, before unfolding the paper.

Her eyes moved across the words.

> Do not send Chen Ruyi to the palace.

Marry her to the Duke's nephew instead.

You know what you have done.

If she enters the palace, everything you buried will surface.

Lady Chen's fingers tightened imperceptibly.

Her expression did not change.

When she looked up again, her face was composed—almost serene.

"Someone is threatening you," she said calmly.

Chen Guowei laughed—short, sharp, and bitter.

"Threatening?" He shook his head. "No. They are informing me."

Lady Chen folded the paper carefully and placed it back on the desk.

"They know too much," she said.

"Yes."

"They are not bluffing."

"No."

"And they are not acting alone."

Chen Guowei's gaze sharpened.

"You think this is tied to the palace?"

Lady Chen did not answer immediately.

Instead, she poured herself a cup of tea from the pot on the side table, her movements unhurried, her thoughts precise.

"Father," she said at last, "has anything moved recently that was meant to stay buried?"

His jaw tightened.

"You know better than to ask that."

"I also know better than to pretend ignorance," she replied evenly. "If someone dares to warn you about Ruyi, it means they believe she is leverage."

Chen Guowei's eyes darkened.

"She is too innocent for this game."

"That is why she is dangerous to you," Lady Chen said quietly.

Silence fell between them.

Then he exhaled heavily and sat down across from her.

"You should not concern yourself with this," he said. "The palace already demands too much from you."

Lady Chen met his gaze steadily.

"The palace is exactly why I am here."

The Weight of the Palace

Chen Guowei studied his daughter carefully.

Lady Chen had always been intelligent—too intelligent, perhaps. As a child, she listened more than she spoke. As a young woman, she learned to observe rather than react.

And now—

Now she was something else entirely.

"You are closer to the Emperor than before," he said slowly.

"Yes."

"Closer than the Empress."

Lady Chen's lips curved faintly.

"For now."

"Do you intend to replace her?"

Lady Chen's eyes flickered—just once.

"No," she said calmly. "I intend to outlast her."

Chen Guowei leaned back, studying her anew.

"You are certain she is not a threat?"

"For now," Lady Chen repeated.

"The Emperor defends her."

"Out of duty."

"He spends time with her."

"Out of obligation."

"And yet," Chen Guowei said sharply, "palaces do not collapse because of duty. They collapse because of sentiment."

Lady Chen's fingers tightened around her teacup.

"There are darker things moving within the palace," she said quietly. "Things even the Emperor cannot fully see."

Chen Guowei stiffened.

"You speak carefully."

"I always do."

She lowered her voice.

"Princess Zhi's miscarriage was not an accident."

He stared at her.

"You believe someone targeted the child?"

"Yes."

"And you believe the Emperor suspects it?"

"Yes."

"Then why is he not acting?"

"Because he lacks proof."

Chen Guowei frowned.

"And you?"

"I am watching."

Ruyi's Fate

Chen Guowei tapped the paper with his finger.

"This letter changes things."

"Yes."

"I was considering sending Ruyi to the palace after the festival."

"You must not," Lady Chen said firmly.

His eyes snapped up.

"You speak boldly."

"I speak strategically."

"She loves the Duke's nephew," he said. "But love is fragile. Power lasts."

Lady Chen leaned forward slightly.

"Father, if you send her to the palace now, she will not survive."

His expression hardened.

"You exaggerate."

"No," she said quietly. "I am protecting our bloodline."

A long silence followed.

Finally, Chen Guowei closed his eyes.

"You believe the person behind this letter would destroy us if Ruyi enters the palace."

"Yes."

"And you believe marrying her elsewhere will neutralize that threat."

"It will remove their leverage."

"And what if they strike anyway?"

Lady Chen's gaze hardened.

"Then we strike back."

Father and Daughter

Chen Guowei studied his daughter for a long moment.

Then, unexpectedly, he laughed softly.

"You have surpassed me," he said.

Lady Chen lowered her gaze slightly—not in humility, but in acknowledgment.

"I learned from you."

He nodded slowly.

"Very well," he said. "Ruyi will not enter the palace."

Lady Chen exhaled quietly.

"But," he continued, "this threat will not disappear."

"No," she agreed. "But now we know where to look."

He looked at her sharply.

"You suspect someone specific."

"Yes."

"Who?"

She stood.

"Not yet."

Chen Guowei narrowed his eyes.

"You have learned caution."

"And patience," she replied.

She bowed lightly.

"Father, be careful. The palace is no longer just a battlefield of ambition."

He watched her turn toward the door.

"And what is it now?" he asked.

Lady Chen paused at the threshold.

"A hunting ground," she said softly.

"And something ancient is awake."

She left without another word.

Chen Guowei sat alone in the quiet study, staring at the folded letter.

For the first time in years—

He felt afraid.

Lady Chen had always believed that affection was not something to be demanded.

It had to be tested.

That evening, the palace lamps were lit earlier than usual, their soft glow reflecting against the polished floors of the Dowager's courtyard. Lady Chen moved with practiced elegance, her steps light, her sleeves flowing like calm water.

She had waited for this moment carefully.

The Emperor had been coming often these days—checking on the Dowager, sharing meals, listening more than speaking. To outsiders, it looked like filial duty.

To Lady Chen, it was opportunity.

She carried a tray of soup herself this time, dismissing the maids before entering the side hall where the Emperor sat reading memorials.

"Your Majesty," she said softly, bowing. "You've been working too late again."

He looked up, surprise flickering across his face. "Lady Chen? Why are you carrying this yourself?"

She smiled faintly. "Because I wanted to."

She placed the tray down gently. "The Dowager is resting. I thought... perhaps you haven't eaten properly."

He studied her for a brief moment before nodding. "Thank you."

She poured the soup with steady hands, then sat opposite him—not too close, not too far.

Silence stretched.

Lady Chen broke it carefully.

"Your Majesty," she said, as if speaking to herself, "may I ask something... personal?"

He didn't look up from the bowl. "Go ahead."

She lowered her eyes. "Do you ever feel... torn? Between duty and what the heart wants?"

The Emperor paused.

Only for a second.

"Yes," he answered honestly.

Her fingers tightened slightly around her sleeve. "And when that happens... which do you choose?"

He placed the spoon down.

"When the heart and duty align, there is no struggle," he said. "When they don't... I choose what must be protected."

Lady Chen's lips curved faintly. "And what is it that you protect?"

This was the test.

She watched his face closely—every breath, every flicker of emotion.

"The stability of the realm," he replied calmly. "And the people bound to it."

She leaned forward slightly. "Including... those closest to you?"

His gaze finally lifted to meet hers.

"Yes," he said. "Including them."

There was no hesitation.

No ambiguity.

No invitation.

Lady Chen felt it then—a subtle but unmistakable boundary.

So she changed the direction gently.

"I heard," she said lightly, "that the Empress has recovered fully. It must be a relief."

"It is," he replied.

"She has been... busy lately," Lady Chen added, carefully. "Outside the palace. Some might misunderstand."

The Emperor's expression hardened—not in anger, but in resolve.

"There is nothing to misunderstand," he said evenly. "She has done nothing wrong."

Lady Chen smiled.

"I see."

Inside, something shifted.

This was not the man she could sway with implication or suggestion.

She tried once more—softly, dangerously.

"Your Majesty," she said, voice barely above a whisper, "if one day you had to choose... between someone who understands palace rules perfectly... and someone who doesn't belong to them at all... what would you do?"

The Emperor stood.

He did not raise his voice.

But his answer was final.

"I would choose the one who doesn't need rules to be honest."

Silence fell like snow.

Lady Chen rose as well, bowing deeply.

"I understand," she said smoothly. "Forgive me for speaking out of turn."

"There's nothing to forgive," he replied.

But they both knew the truth.

The test was over.

And he had passed.

Afterward

That night, Lady Chen returned to her chamber alone.

She removed her hairpin slowly, staring at her reflection.

"So it's like this," she murmured.

He was not cold.

He was not cruel.

But his heart had moved somewhere she could not reach—not fully, not anymore.

Still, she smiled faintly.

Passing a test did not mean the game was over.

It only meant she had learned where the lines were drawn.

And which ones... she must never cross openly.